

THE NEXT CAMPAIGN—PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

Where Will Germany Strike?—A Western Offensive Possible but Unlikely

By FRANK H. SIMONDS

Author of "The World War," "They Shall Not Pass"

The campaign of 1918 opens with certain very clearly marked problems in all minds. By reason of the Russian collapse and the Italian disaster, the Germans have regained the offensive, the initiative. There is now the opportunity and the power to strike. For their enemies the riddle is now: Where will the next German blow fall? In the West, in Salonica, in Asia? In addition, there is the problem of the Italian campaign, which is still proceeding. Will the Germans and their Austrian allies, who are doing most of the work, be able to press their advantage to the extent of compelling the Italians, now supported by the French and the British, to fall back to the line of the Adige, surrendering Venice, Vicenza and Padua?

It is perhaps worth while at the outset to examine for a moment the conditions out of which the present German advantage has grown. At the outset of the last campaign, that of 1917, the German situation was, on the surface, almost desperate. Russia, France, Britain and Italy, with their minor allies, possessed a combined force vastly in excess of the troops of Germany and Austria. The Central Powers were outnumbered on every front, and, by contrast with their condition in the previous year, they no longer possessed a strategic reserve like that used against Verdun.

Germany Hard Pressed

Beginning in June, July and August, 1916, when French and British troops at the Somme, Italian troops along the Isonzo and Russian troops in Galicia had developed a concentric and, in a measure, a coordinated offensive, the Germans had been compelled to accept the defensive, and on all fronts they had lost ground, prisoners and advantages, which were not to be concealed or counterbalanced by the successful offensive made against Rumania just as the campaign closed, an offensive which was actually successful because Rumania was sold out by the Russian ruling faction, betrayed, and thus abandoned to destruction.

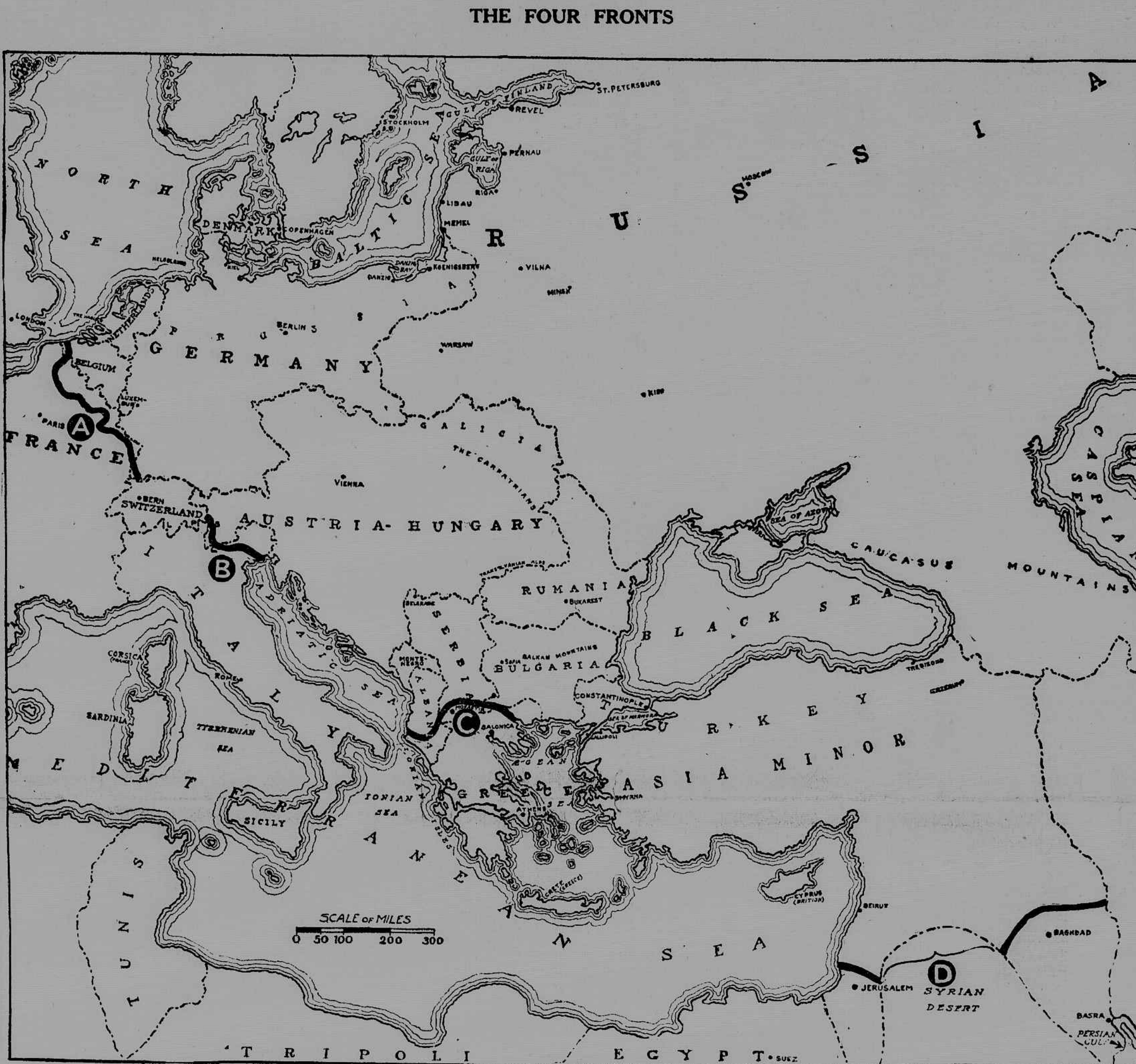
Germany had found herself hard pressed all through the latter half of 1916, and her enemies might reasonably have expected at this time last year that with the renewal of a concentric attack in 1917 Germany would be forced to shorten her lines East and West, or court the disaster which came to Lee when he endeavored to hold a front too extended for his numbers in the last days of the Confederacy.

The concentric attack was resumed, but after a preliminary round of Allied successes, French and British on the West front, Italian on the Isonzo, and Russian in Galicia, Russia suddenly collapsed, and from that moment onward rapidly disappeared as a factor in the situation. With the disappearance of Russia the Allies lost their advantage in numbers. Consequently, they were still more numerous, but they had no longer a decisive advantage. Moreover, since the Western front has only a limited extent, Germany at once acquired a reserve to be used on this line when there was need, although she did not make and has not as yet made any large draft upon it.

Allied Failure in 1917

The failure of the Allied offensive in 1917 was assured the moment Russia dropped out, and Germany was henceforth in a position to level a new blow. She had the numbers on the line and behind it to make the security of the Western front absolute, despite minor fluctuations. What should she do with her new reserves acquired through Russian defection? She elected to use a portion of them, a small fraction, certainly less than 100,000, in an offensive against Italy, whose Isonzo attack was becoming dangerous to Austrian safety. The result was the Italian disaster and the loss by Italy of 250,000 prisoners, half of all her artillery and more than half of all her military accumulation in stores and munitions.

The Allied disaster completed the ruin of Allied prospects which the Russian collapse had begun. Italy now became a liability, and it was necessary to send men and guns at once to save her. At the moment when the Germans were beginning to transfer their troops from the Eastern to the Western front the Allies were obliged to detach two armies from the Western front to serve in Italy. And with this action they lost all advantage of numbers on the West. The recent British attack at Cambrai, which might have resulted in one of the decisive battles of the war, had Haig been able to support Byng



A—West front. B—Italian front. C—Macedonian front. D—Asiatic front.

with the corps sent under Plumer to Italy, ended in a bitter disappointment and a dashing of all British hopes.

As the New Year opens the Germans are able to put on the Western front substantially as many troops as the British and the French. I do not think that even Austrian aid will give the Germans any decisive advantage in the matter of numbers. They are able to concentrate in the West most of the guns hitherto used against the Russians, all those captured from the Italians, and it is not impossible that some of the Russian artillery will presently find its way to the German lines in the West. In this situation any Allied offensive on a large scale becomes, if not impossible, altogether unlikely.

To attack now would mean for the Allies huge losses, with relatively small possibility of a supreme success. It would risk exhaustion without commensurate promise of victory. On the other hand, to wait, to accept the defensive, is to enable the United States to bring up its forces, of which no large portion can be effective in 1918, but perhaps a million will be ready to take part in the campaign of 1919. Hence the Allies, since the submarine warfare does not threaten them with famine or defeat in the next sixteen months, are bound to accept the defensive and let Germany risk exhaustion by the attack.

Where Will She Strike?

Now, as the situation stands to-day, Germany has the men and the material for an attack. But she cannot wait. No great new ally is getting ready behind her guns, as we are preparing behind the French and British armies. Her prospects next year will certainly be worse than they are now. But far and away beyond the military are the economic questions. Every month the war continues the world is becoming insensibly but unmistakably organized industrially, economically, financially against the German; the hostility to Germany is spreading and the task of regaining the old markets and establishing the old commercial relations is becoming more difficult. Thus, if Germany has the opportunity to strike, she has also the necessity of making prompt efforts to close

the war, which is no longer merely a problem of military factors.

But where will she strike? This is the question which is filling the press of the world to-day. Will she strike in Asia Minor to regain Bagdad and Jerusalem, restore her dream of a Berlin-Byzantium-Bagdad railway, regain her old sally-port against British Egypt and the Suez Canal which a Turkish Palestine supplied? Will she attack the heterogeneous force now defending Salonica and offering the sole European obstacle to the completion of Mitteleuropa, walling off this vast Teutonic creation from the Aegean and from the natural outlet of the Central Empire at the south?

Western Offensive Unlikely

Or will the Germans make one more colossal effort in the West? They failed at the Marne, they failed at the Yser and about Ypres, they failed at Verdun; and in these three attempts they had all the advantages that numbers, preparation, munitions could give them. Can they hope to succeed now? Is it worth the sacrifice, recognizing that if they try and fail they will come to the end of the year facing victorious foes who are assured of a great strategic reserve in the following campaign, when the United States is at last ready?

The Germans have announced their forthcoming attack is to be made in the West. They have heralded it with brass bands and a blare of trumpets; but their attack upon Verdun, upon Russia in April, 1915, upon Italy a few weeks ago, all these were surprises so far as German publicity was concerned. If Germany contemplated an attack in the West, would she talk about it, giving her foes due warning, the chance to make the last preparation and search their own fronts yet once more for some weak point?

It seems to me, and this is the conclusion I find in most of the European journals, that a German offensive in the West is unlikely. It is by no means inconceivable; it may come; it will come if the Germans are actually in possession of information, naturally lacking in our own case,

which would lead them to believe that either the British or the French armies are breaking down in morale, as were the Italian before the recent disaster; but, accepting the possibility, it remains plain that the great weight of chance is against such a venture.

A Western offensive can come, it seems to me, only if the German situation—I mean economic, not military—is so desperate that the Germans feel that they must risk everything on one more bid for a quick decision. In that case they will attack in the West, because nowhere else can a decision be had. A complete victory in Italy, even a victory which brought Italy to make a separate peace, would not be decisive so far as Britain, France and the United States are concerned. Much less would a complete success at Salonica or about Bagdad win the war, or even compel peace on terms which would leave Germany any substantial profit for her great sacrifices in men and treasure. Victory in the war, if it is to come on the field of battle, must come somewhere between the North Sea and Switzerland, and if Germany feels that she must risk all on one more bid for a decision under conditions far less advantageous than on the other occasions she will attack in the West and we shall see the greatest conflict of the war unfold within the next two or three months.

Minor Goal Probable

On the other hand, if Germany hopes simply to last the war out, if she hopes to win it as Frederick the Great won his most terrible struggle, by wearing out his foes, as Louis XIV saved his territory in the War of the Spanish Succession, she is most likely to seek to break the nerve of her opponents by aiming at victories in indecisive fields, which, despite the fact that they are minor, will impress the world, and because of local circumstances can be won with a minimum of cost to herself. Such an operation was the attack upon Rumania a year ago. The recent Italian affair is an equally good illustration of this strategy.

If Germany desires to take Salonica, I

think the majority of Allied military critics are of the opinion that she could do it at a price. She has the interior lines of communication. An attack upon Salonica would put the Allied transport system to a very great strain; it would compel a further shift of French and British troops to the Near East, certain to be opposed bitterly in both nations, and it would thus weaken the Western front, which remains the decisive front. The Germans could also rely upon Bulgarian troops for the main effort. For Bulgaria Salonica is the prize that has been sought ever since Bulgaria began to have great aspirations.

A Macedonian Victory

Germany would supply the guns, the generalship, a few chosen troops, perhaps no more than those below is leading in Northern Italy. Certain Austrian units might be added, now that Austria has been saved from immediate anxieties. Such an attack would be directed against a very strange Allied army, made up of Italians, Serbs, Greeks, Russians, British, French and contingents drawn from British and French colonies. These forces hold a wide front, with comparatively few good lines of communication behind them, and the people of the districts they occupy are in part hostile, as is a considerable element in all of Greece.

Now, conceive what would be the effect of a sudden and successful push early in the spring which carried the Germans close to Salonica, if it did not immediately win the town. At the outset of a new campaign the Allies would suffer a moral defeat. They would have promptly to decide whether to send troops from the West to the Near East at a moment when the German blow in the West would still seem to be hanging over their heads. For, whatever happens, the Germans are going to have the men and the guns to attack in the West if they choose, without regard to any Macedonian effort. In fact, if the Allies should decide to send men and guns from the West to Salonica, in addition to the armies which will have to be maintained in Northern Italy, the Germans might decide, rightly or wrongly, that the

situation in the West, thus modified, warranted the launching of a real offensive which should aim at a decision.

In a word, a German offensive against Salonica which would have a real chance of success would, at the opening of the fighting season of 1918, upset all the Allied plans and precipitate a real crisis, the crisis incident to making the decision whether to continue to spend men and guns and transport, the most precious element of all, upon a Macedonian sideshow. If the decision was against such dissipation Greece might fall and the German domination of the Balkans would be complete, the Kaiser would reestablish his brother-in-law and confront the world with the accomplished fact.

Now, as to Asia. Just as an attack upon Salonica would, in the main, be made by Bulgarian troops, an offensive against Bagdad and Jerusalem would be chiefly the work of Turkish troops, German led, reinforced by a few German divisions and munitioned and gunned by the Germans. It would cost the Germans little in life and a failure would have no disastrous effects at home. And the same is equally true of the Salonica enterprise; if it succeeded, the British would have to face the problem of making new sacrifices in the West and withdrawing new divisions or of accepting the loss of Mesopotamia and giving all their attention to the defence of Egypt. Egypt and India would, in a sense, be imperilled, and both have a value in the British mind wholly unappreciated by any other nation save the German.

Venice Likely to Fall

The last thing in the world I am trying to do is to prophesy that the Germans will make their great effort for 1918 in Macedonia or in Asia, or in both regions. What I am trying to point out is that the weight of evidence points in this direction. I expect to see the Austro-German offensive in Northern Italy reach the Adige either before winter shuts down or in the spring. The Central Powers have advanced in the mountains now to the point where they possess most of the necessary ground, and the Italian position seems to me untenable.

Allies Must Stand On the Defensive Until United States Comes Up

Copyright 1918—The Tribune Association

ble. The Italians will naturally hold it as long as possible, to gain time to prepare the line of the Adige, but the line of the Piave, in the judgment of military men, is no longer permanently tenable, in the face of recent Austro-German gains on the Asiago Plateau.

This means that Venice will fall. It means that a new strain may be put upon Allied resources in men if Italy calls for further reinforcements. Add to this a successful offensive in the spring against Salonica, and what will the result be? Will the Allies then send still more troops from the West to save the Balkans? If they do, so much the better opening for a German offensive in the West, so much greater the strain upon Allied transport and by so much more the domestic problems of food and power in the Allied countries are complicated. Exactly the same circumstances are in the picture if the Salonica blow is preceded by a winter campaign against Bagdad.

Allies Must Wait

If the Germans can wait six months, if their economic, political and industrial condition enables the high command to pursue a strategy purely concerned with military considerations, then it seems to me they are bound to make their first campaigns in Macedonia and in Asia, with an intensification of pressure upon Italy, if they do not push her behind the Adige before the spring campaign opens.

Thereafter, if the Allies should yield to the obvious temptation and French and British troops are sent to Italy and to Salonica, if British troops are withdrawn from Flanders for Egypt and Palestine, then the Germans can launch their great Western offensive. Meantime they can threaten this great blow, using it as a political rather than a military weapon, holding it over the heads of their Western foes and thus possibly contributing to the discussion of peace.

If the Allies hold fast to the West and take their losses in the East, Germany, having launched no Western offensive, can still seek a peace by negotiation with the coming of the winter, using the successes she may have attained, perhaps at Salonica, perhaps at Bagdad, probably in Northern Italy, as arguments to prove that she is invincible. And in all this time the Allies will hardly be in a position to make a really great offensive in the West, because the United States will not yet be able to supply the troops necessary to insure a decisive advantage in numbers.

If this German peace bid fails, then the advantage will pass for all the period of the war to the enemies of Germany, because our reserves of men are wellnigh unlimited, and by the spring of 1919, thanks to a million American troops, Germany will be outmanned on the Western front and we and our allies will be in a position to launch and maintain an offensive which will bring Germany to terms.

Domestic Politics Another Matter

The campaign of 1918, as I see it, promises, then, to be one in which the Germans will have the offensive, and thus the opportunity to strike where they choose. I believe they will strike, not in the West and immediately, but that, while continuing their pressure upon Italy, they will open their operations with an offensive against the British in Mesopotamia, and possibly in Palestine, using Turkish troops, and when spring comes direct another attack, this time upon Salonica, employing mainly Bulgarian troops. As the Austrians will supply most of the man power for the Italian campaign, this will leave the Germans with practically all their man power in hand for use on the Western front, if they choose; but I do not believe they will use it there unless the economic and industrial situation within Germany is such that they cannot endure another ten months of war, or the Allies make such a general dissipation of their forces, thus weakening their Western front, that the Germans see a chance for a decision in the West. If they do, they will take it.

In all this discussion I have left out any examination of the domestic political conditions of Britain, France and Italy. If the people of any one of these nations become war weary the Germans will profit. On the other hand, a collapse of the German or Austrian public would be similarly advantageous to the Allies. But these are not, immediately, military considerations, and it is with the military considerations that I have endeavored to deal.